

The need to create pictures

The Jewish response to the ban on graven imagery

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י = Y (yod)

ה = H (hey)

ו = V (vav)

א = alef = one

When words and pictures were one

Concrete poetry seems like a contemporary art form, pioneered in *Horse Calligram*, by Guillaume Apollinaire, the resident poet of Picasso-era Paris (FIG. 1). Here, Apollinaire reconciles distinct visual and verbal languages. Such endeavors seem apt, given Apollinaire's friends in the lamp-lit enclave of the left bank: artistic luminaries and *avante garde* literati. With just a few French words along equine curves, Apollinaire draws upon the time-honored Latin saying *Ut pictura poesis*. "As is painting, so is poetry." Yet Apollinaire's calligrams, or word pictures, seem new and vigorous even today, gallivanting away from staid forms.



FIG. 1

Apollinaire also built an Eiffel tower out of French words (FIG. 2). One might think of the Biblical Tower of Babel here and its apocryphal story. At one point, Babel, in present-day Iraq, hosted a city in which all of humanity congregated and spoke the same language. The great tower of Babel, however, seemed a dizzying monument to human arrogance, angering God. The tower fell, and the peoples of Babel scattered, their common language becoming the babble of today.



FIG. 2

In truth, linguists have unearthed a deep root in most Western languages. It traces to the Indo-Europeans, a pre-literate nomadic group, which may have originated in India. When writing developed, letters and images were one and the same. The noted linguist John Algeo says, "There can be no doubt that writing grew out of drawing, the wordless comic-strip type of drawing..."



FIG. 3

Many pre-literate Native American cultures used pictures to communicate. In the Northern Plains, artists of the Lakota tribe created winter counts, which reduced a year into a significant event, represented in a drawing. (FIG. 3) The Lakota knew 1833-1834 as "storm of stars winter," a tipi under a starry sky.

The Chippewa of Minnesota, meanwhile, translated an oral storytelling tradition into "song-pictures." (FIG. 4) Scholar Henry Munn writes about the pictographic nature of oral storytelling in Native American and Chinese cultures: "The imprint of feet in the mud is the first writing of intentional existence. It is not by chance that the Minister of Houang-ti got the idea of writing from the tracks of birds in the sand. In the pre-Columbian codices footprints often appear, depicting the path of migration or used to mark intervals, as the tracks of moose and other animals appear in the petroglyphs of the North American Indians."



FIG. 4

In a similar way, the seemingly abstract letters of ancient cultures derived from living images at first. The Hebrew "Alef," the ancestor to the Greek Alpha and our letter A, originally represented the horned head of an ox. (FIG. 5) Oxen were the first beasts of labor in the region, and it makes sense one occupies the alef of the alphabet. Even with word and picture deftly tethered in calligram form, Apollinaire didn't ride his horse so fleetly from tradition: the first letter of his last name was once a stout ox.



FIG. 5

Hebrew letters gradually unmoored from their pictographic origins. Yet through the centuries Jewish artists have still seen text and image as interwoven. The art of composing images from contoured lines of text (FIG. 6), micrography, began when Jewish scribes wrote marginalia notes in religious texts. Such a careful practice seems endemic to a culture that venerates reading.



FIG. 6

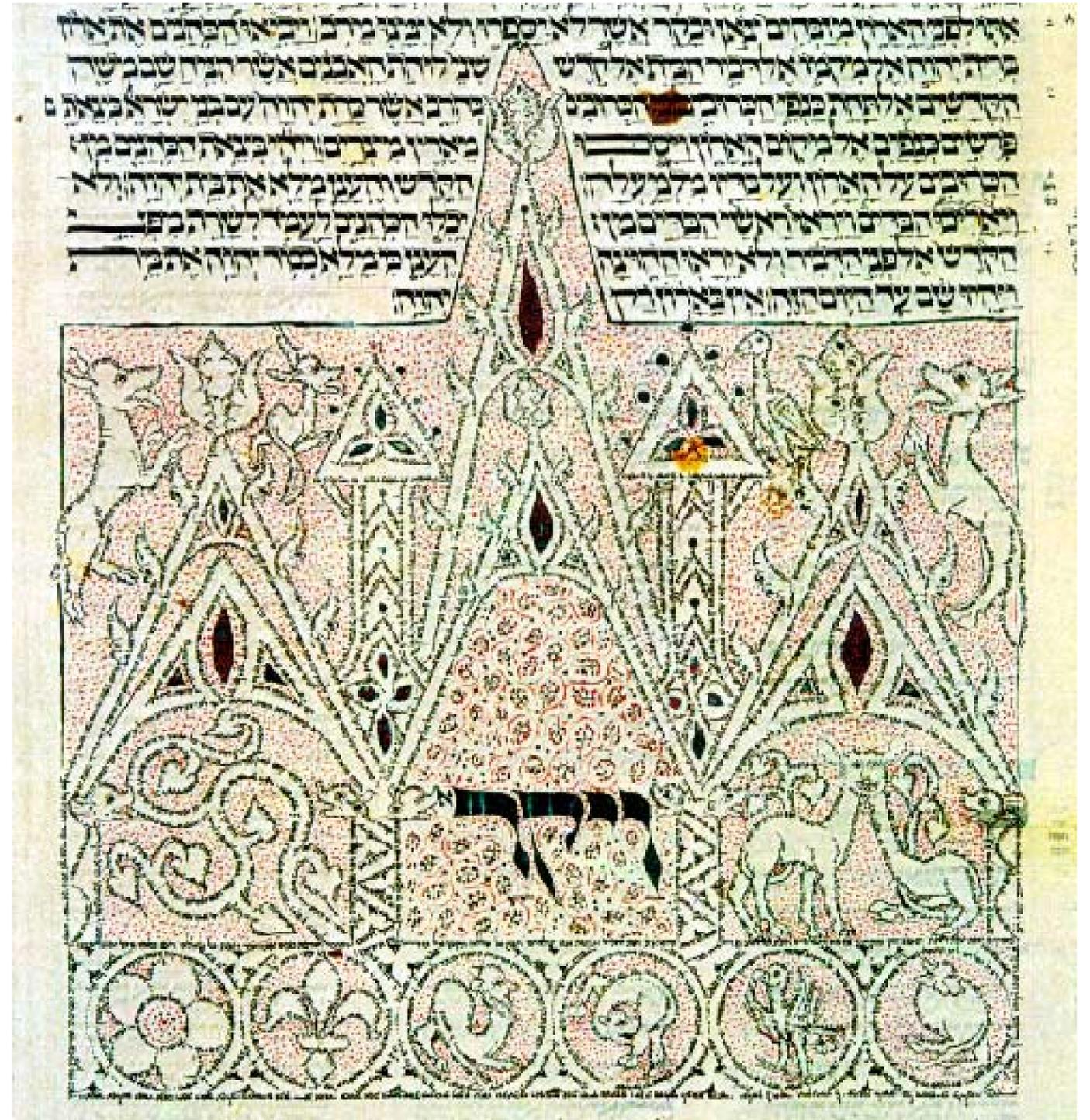
The Second commandment prohibits iconographic imagery. But Jewish scribes could create decorative images that helped to relax and prepare the mind for contemplation. Such a philosophy was espoused by the Jewish scholar Maimonides, and amplified by Profiat Duran, who saw books as decorated, miniature temples.



Manuscripts as micrographic miniature temples

These sample Hebrew manuscript pages show how micrographic treatment was not just reserved for the margins of texts or initial letters. Instead, micrography could hold complex pages of text with an intricacy that parallels Christian masterworks, such as the Celtic Book of Kells.

In 1403, Profiat Duran said, “One must always study from beautiful books, pleasing in the beauty and harmony of their calligraphy and their parchment, and with splendid decoration and binding...such things inculcate a love and desire of study: to meditate on harmonious forms and splendid images and drawings enlarges and stimulates the mind and fortifies its faculties...for sacred books, it is not only appropriate but an obligation—I mean to decorate them and endeavor to make them as beautiful, as sumptuous and as pleasing as possible. God desired his holy sanctuary to be embellished with gold, silver, jewels and precious stones; the same should be done to his holy books.”





Kabbalah: not simply pleasing to the eyes

The kabbalists were Jewish mystics who read text as poetic constellations, which mirror the natural and supernatural world. Text can be translated into the stars of the night sky, which shine as a poem: celestial, cartographic, and concrete. The letter forms here are Hebrew but from Hellenic times.

The image at right is the concrete poem *Rain*, by Apollinaire. Both images evoke the mythic origin of words. The oral poet Maria Sabina of the Mazatec peoples once said, “And as well I see that language falls, comes from up above, as if they were little luminous objects that fall from heaven...”

Here, the scholar Henry Munn notes an echo to Chinese myth: “The K’uei star with pointed rays is the Lord of Literature on earth and as Tsang Chieh, who had four eyes, looked up (into heaven) he saw images dropping down (from the star) and these he combined with footprints of birds and tortoises.”

Naftali Bacharach (Hebrew, 17th century)

A POEM FOR THE SEFIROT AS A WHEEL OF LIGHT

(THE IMAGE)



Kabbalah concrete poems of the unseen

“Medieval Jewish poesis plays off the image of ten sefirot (emanations) as the resonance of Ein-Sof (the limitless) into the world of our possible perception....In the present instance the “wheel of light” is not a fixed or static image (from which the “limitless” could as well be excluded) but an image in motion and tied finally to the mystery of creation as worked through by the 16th-century kabbalist and poet Isaac Luria.

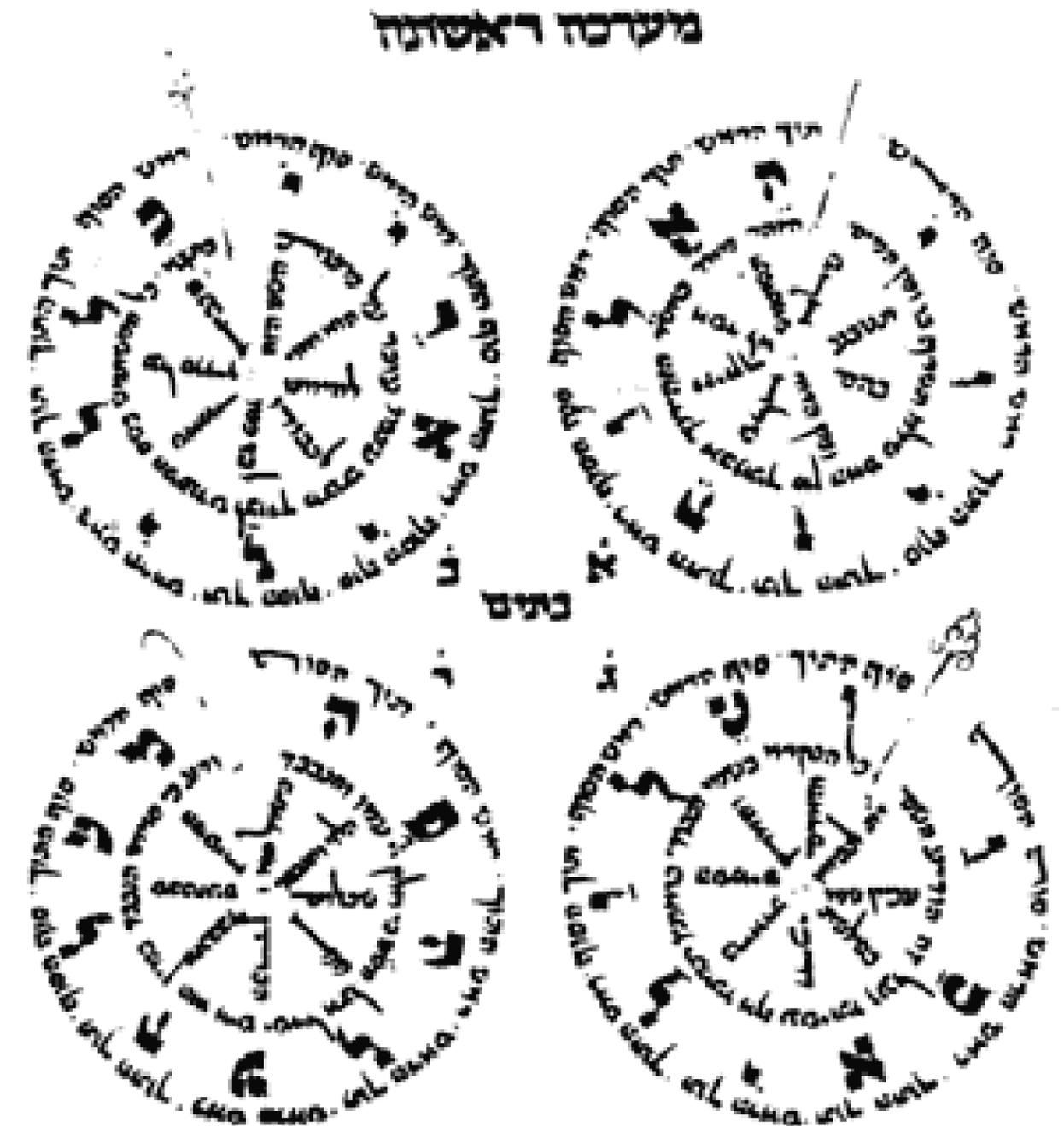
Here the limitless that fills all space contracts itself to leave a point or vacuum behind in which the universe originates. The act of withdrawal is called *tsimtsum* (“contraction”) and the point is called *tehiru*, the primordial space. A ray of light moving across this circular space fills it with the ten sefirot, which surround it like a wheel of light. Only a residue of Ein-Sof stays within it — like little drops of oil.”—Jerome Rothenberg, *Exiled in the Word*

Abraham Abulafia (Hebrew, 1240–c. 1291)

From LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME

“Circles”

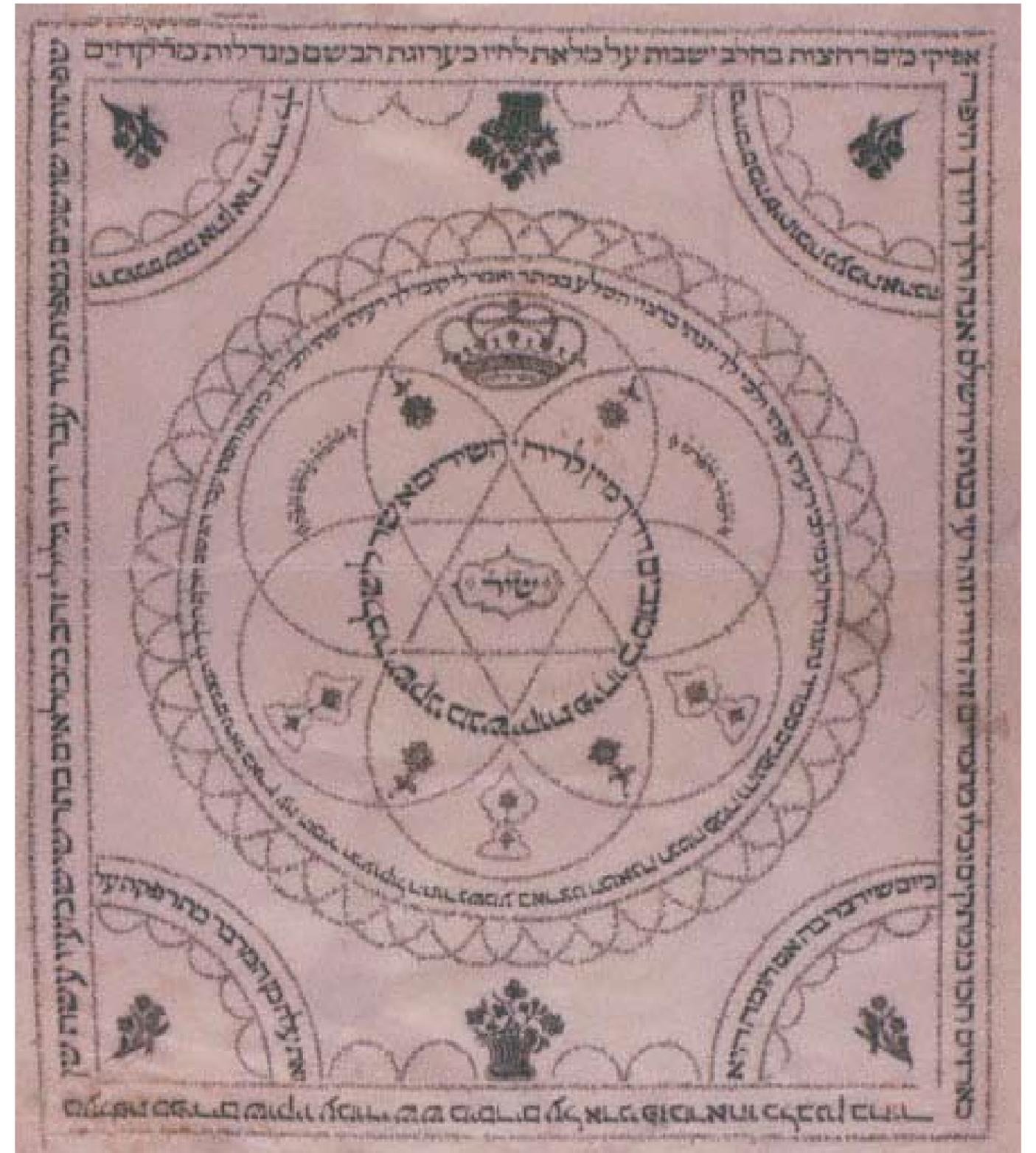
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Uses of micrography

At first, Jewish scribes hand-wrote micrographic images, often as inked marginalia in manuscripts. Because of the highly literate Jewish population in most diaspora cultures, many of the texts were privately owned, not secluded in places of worship. Other uses of micrography were ceremonial, such as the ketubbah, or marriage contract. The text comes from the *Song of Songs*, a romantic poem in the Old Testament. The circular pattern may reflect the elliptical Hebrew saying, *Ani l'dodi v' l'dodi*, I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.





Popularized micrography

With the advent of the industrial print process known as lithography—made famous in Honore Daumier illustrations—micrography made the leap to popular, mass-produced books and posters. The image at left shows a whimsical winged camel and an entire, minute Book of Esther. The above images show micrographic commemorative portraits: a popular nineteenth century rabbi and an esteemed Yiddish poet. With micrography, Jewish portraitists showed the precise care of ancient scribes, inherently honoring the greatness of the individual portrayed.

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